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Resistance and Accommodation: Protestant Responses to Nazism

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Among Germany's Christians in the early twentieth century, Protestants were the most prevalent.¹ Protestantism was bound to Germany's history and society in the man of Martin Luther and the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation, and the Protestant church had since been a key force in constructing a moral universe for the German nation into the twentieth century. However, Hitler's conscious construction of a new moral order directly challenged that universe by virtue of nationalism, allegiance to the Führer, racism, and eventually a war of conquest and genocide. His aim was total control, but "Nazi claims of success in converting the nation to their set of values... were exaggerated," argues Alan Bullock, "The clearest expression of this was the split in the Protestant churches."² Nazism confronted Germany's spiritual leaders with a difficult choice: they could either capitulate and marry Protestantism with Nazism, as did the German Christians, or they could explicitly reject Nazism and face persecution at the hands of the state, as did the Confessing Church.

Peter Berger, an eminent scholar on the sociology of religion, posits that "Every human society is an enterprise of world-building. Religion occupies a distinctive place in this enterprise."³ That is, the complex web of relationships and functional roles that we

call society is in fact a product of our own making, only existing because we exist, and only persisting because we collectively agree that it should. Berger develops his corollary about religion's distinctive place by arguing that it functions as a "sacred canopy" – a socially constructed order of reality that embraces supernatural power as central. It is called a canopy because it is protective – those who embrace it are shielded from the terror of chaos, the insanity of a world without meaning and order.⁴ There is a problem, however; as Berger puts it, "All socially constructed worlds are inherently precarious."⁵ And because they are precarious, they require social processes to maintain their stability. One such process is what Berger calls "legitimation": "socially objectivated 'knowledge' that serves to explain the social order"⁶ or the social process by which ideology is used to give legitimacy to extant social institutions (i.e. family, government, academia). Berger goes on to say that "religion has been the historically most widespread and effective instrumentality of legitimation... by *locating* [social institutions] within a sacred and cosmic frame of reference."⁷ In addition to many other social institutions, German Protestantism upheld and supported the secular government – both in the early twentieth century and in the four hundred years since the Protestant Reformation. The implications under Nazism are disturbing: Robert P. Ericksen and Susannah Heschel write, "Most important, [the clergy's] role involved moral suasion: Through the support for Nazi policies articulated by many religious leaders, ordinary Germans were reassured that those

¹ Andrew Chandler, ed., The Moral Imperative: New Essays on the Ethics of Resistance in National Socialist Germany 1933-1945 (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), 3.

² Alan Bullock, Hitler and Stalin: Parallel Lives (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 319.

³ Peter L. Berger, "The Sacred Canopy" in Sociology of Religion: A Reader, Susanne C. Monahan, et al., eds. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall Inc., 2001), 23.

⁴ Berger argues that the sacred's even deeper opposition than that of the profane is that of chaos, for "profane" supposes a universe of meaning where its opposite is the sacred, but chaos supposes no meaning and provides no organizational strategy for experience.

⁵ Berger, 26.

⁶ By "objectivated," Berger means the process by which certain ideas take on the force of truth by society's collective agreement that they are true. Ibid., 26.

⁷ Ibid.,

policies did not violate the tenets of Christian faith and morality.”⁸

When Hitler was elected Supreme Chancellor in 1933, the Protestant church yet had a long-standing history of compliance and submission to the German state. Luther himself had been a strong advocate of apoliticism and in his day “[t]he role of the Church... lay simply in the ministry of the sacraments and the preaching of the gospel. The prince was the *summus episcopus*, with power over the property, ecclesiastical jurisdiction and doctrine of the church.”⁹ German Protestantism thus favored hierarchy and authoritarian government and thus it shared Hitler’s pain in Germany’s 1918 defeat and the subsequent, weak Weimar Republic. For both the German people at large and its Protestants, liberal democracy was associated with defeat and shattered pride, whereas the authoritarian Kaiser was associated with strength and patriotism. “For many Protestants, Hitler’s promise of a structural regeneration of the nation, his call for sacrifice and unity, met the need of a revitalized faith that the churches could no longer satisfy from their own enfeebled resources.”¹⁰

The German Christians, those Protestants who combined Christian theology with Nazi racial ideology, most explicitly demonstrated this church-state legitimation and collusion. They committed themselves to the political supremacy of Nazi Germany by adding “nature and history”¹¹ to what counted as divine revelation. This stance resulted in a church whose organizing principle was Nazi racism rather than biblical theology. Doris L. Bergen, in her work Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement and the Third

Reich, argues that in this syncretism of Christianity, Nazism dominated because it entailed the most significant real world pressures (i.e., arrest and murder of dissenters), whereas Christianity, their construction of otherworldly pressures (i.e., salvation and damnation), could be more easily molded to suit the needs created by Nazism’s demands.¹² Here the social process of legitimation overrode theological and philosophical consistency and replaced Christian morality with what Claudia Koonz has called the “Nazi Conscience.”

As early as 1935, congregations were moving for the expulsion of Jews from churches that putatively should have been ethnically German; the expelled would have to form their own ethnically-boundaried Jewish congregations.¹³ In 1939, German Christian leaders signed the Godesberg Declaration, an ecclesiological document that “aimed to transform the Protestant church into a tool of racial policy.”¹⁴ German Christians thus avidly supported Hitler and the Nazi state, including its racial discrimination, the war effort, and even the Final Solution. Unfortunately for them, however, the Nazi state was uninterested in them, as at least Nazis and Protestant radicals like Dietrich Bonhoeffer recognized the absolute incompatibility of Nazism and Christianity.¹⁵ Koonz notes that the Nazis “spurned their collaboration.”¹⁶

Hitler had no respect for Christianity beyond the institutional stability of the Vatican. “Taken to its logical extreme,” he said, “Christianity would mean the systematic cultivation of human failure.”¹⁷ Ever politically keen, however, he understood that ninety percent of his subjects were

⁸ Robert P. Ericksen and Heschel, Susannah, eds., Betrayal: German Churches and the Holocaust (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1999), 4.

⁹ Chandler, 3-4.

¹⁰ Bullock, 220.

¹¹ Doris L. Bergen, Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 11.

¹² *Ibid.*, 11.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁶ Claudia Koonz, The Nazi Conscience (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press, 2003), 213.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 381.

Christians,¹⁸ and before 1939, “Hitler virtually never mentioned three controversial themes that shaped his political agenda: crude anti-Semitism, contempt for Christianity, and preparation for a war of conquest.”¹⁹ Instead of expressing his contempt, he spoke of “Positive Christianity,” meaning “something vague and undoctinal... love of neighbor, social welfare, and so on... It was useful to put it in, because it committed nobody to anything and at the same time sounded attractive to all who were against atheism, blasphemy, sacrilege, and loose morals.”²⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer described it this way: “The great masquerade of evil has played havoc with all our ethical concepts. For evil to appear disguised as light, charity, historical necessity, or social justice is quite bewildering to anyone brought up on our traditional ethical concepts...”²¹ It was in this way that Hitler subverted Germany’s moral world with “The National Socialist gospel... of manipulability and manipulation.”²²

“Despite their precarious location between the disapproval of some fellow Protestants on the one hand and the annoyance of the Nazi leadership on the other, the German Christians maintained a significant presence throughout the years of National Socialist rule.”²³ Their presence managed to create a lot of trouble for anti-Nazi Christians as well as contribute to the formation of the Confessing Church. “In July 1933 Protestant church elections... Representatives of the German Christian movement won two-thirds of the votes cast.” Added to their political strength was their doctrinal repugnancy (to orthodox believers). Karl Barth, as the theologian of the Confessing Church, explicitly rejected their

inclusion of nature and history as part of God’s revelation to humanity:

Our protest... must be directed fundamentally against the fact (which is the source of all individual errors) that, beside the Holy Scriptures as the unique source of revelation, the German-Christians affirm the German nationhood, its history and its contemporary political situation as a second source of revelation, and thereby betray themselves to be believers in “another God.”²⁴

The domination of official church channels by the German Christians and their alteration of Christian theology both pushed the Confessing Church to organize according to the terms of the Barmen Declaration.

Due to Hitler’s duplicity, the Nazi state was able to coexist in relative peace with the Protestant Church at large (obviously, they had no problems with German Christians, except perhaps annoyance) – but peace was short-lived. Article 24 of the Nazi Party Program states, “We demand the freedom of all religious denominations in the State insofar as they do not endanger its existence or violate the ethical and moral feelings of the Germanic race.”²⁵ The Nazis therein demanded an expansion of the state’s traditional role as the aforementioned *summus episcopus*. The apostle Paul wrote that

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those

¹⁸ Beate Ruhm von Oppen, Religion and Resistance to Nazism (Princeton, New Jersey: Center of International Studies, 1971), 3.

¹⁹ Koonz, 79.

²⁰ Von Oppen, 3.

²¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letters and Papers from Prison, trans. Reginald Fuller (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1967).

²² Von Oppen, 68.

²³ Bergen, 2.

²⁴ Karl Barth, The German Church Conflict, trans. T.H.L. Parker (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1967), 16

²⁵ Von Oppen, 25.

who do will bring judgment on themselves.²⁶

This mandate “became the very foundation of political abstinence in the Third Reich,”²⁷ as many Christians were essentially apolitical and reticent to engage in any sort of political action or resistance. However, under Nazism’s totalitarian claims, “Nothing, no aspect of life, was allowed to be unpolitical. It was a new religion against the old.”²⁸ A Nazi leader of adult education in Silesia wrote that “our entire struggle for a transformation of the people to the National Socialist way of thinking will remain elusive as long as these Bible studies with their church-political reports exist, we ask for permission to pull this place apart.”²⁹ Permission such as this would eventually be granted and the church would not be allowed to withdraw into its protective apolitical sphere. This expanded interpretation and implementation of the state’s historical role in church affairs challenged long-held assumptions about the proper order of society – here *führerprinzip*³⁰ clashed directly with both church doctrine and historical tradition.

Protestants repulsed by this infringement responded with the Barmen Declaration of May 1934 which affirmed

[Karl] Barth’s claim that Christ, and the knowledge of him gained through the Bible, was the only authority of the church and that the knowledge of God gained through the Bible was the only source of revelation... Most important, the church denied that the state had a right to impose a totalitarian order on all aspects of human life, since

part of the church’s vocation was to give order and meaning to human existence.³¹

The declaration marked a break with four-hundred years of German church-state collusion by denying the Nazis “power over the property, ecclesiastical jurisdiction and doctrine of the church.”³² It was this direct challenge to the Nazi dictatorship that became the founding document of the Confessing Church, a community fundamentally and openly at odds with a brutal and ruthless regime. Its story undoubtedly “provides insight into the tensions between individual conscience and loyalty to the state, between moral beliefs and political responsibility.”³³

Even within the ranks of anti-Nazi Protestants, however, there was anything but univocality – radicals “wanted to send a message... that the Christian church had no room for Nazi ideology” whereas moderates disparaged exclusion and advocated leading “misguided ‘German Christians’ back into the fold.”³⁴ “Most Christians,” concurs Doris Bergen, “in Germany did not share [Dietrich] Bonhoeffer’s conviction about the fundamental opposition between those two worldviews...”³⁵ It thus cannot be supposed that all members of the Confessing Church were hard-lining anti-Nazis in the same way that Bonhoeffer, Barth and Niemöller were. The members’ “behavior [was] guided not only by strength of conscience or love of humanity but by fear, nationalism, and human weakness.”³⁶ Some would commit, like Bonhoeffer, to organized, violent resistance, but many remained in the sphere of uncertainty and inaction. “The fact is well known that the vast majority of church members... never got beyond the first stage [of passive resistance], and that only a tiny handful progressed through all five stages [from passive resistance to revolutionary

²⁶ Romans 13:1.

²⁷ John S. Conway, “The Role of the Churches in the German Resistance Movement,” in Chandler, 12.

²⁸ Von Oppen, 5-6. Underline original.

²⁹ Barnett, 81.

³⁰ “[Führerprinzip] gave Hitler the right to make arbitrary decisions [and instituted]... the concept of a personal and unconditional loyalty to the Führer.” Bullock, 75.

³¹ Barnett, 54a.

³² Chandler, 3-4.

³³ Barnett, 6.

³⁴ Ibid., 54.

³⁵ Bergen, 1.

³⁶ Barnett, 6.

conspiracy].”³⁷ It was the “utter fearlessness” of the Jehovah’s Witnesses, according to Beate Ruhm von Oppen, which made them the only group

who behaved in the way that in retrospect many seem to think that only logical Christian way to behave. They refused to bear arms, even to work indirectly for the war, they even refused to give the German salute or to pronounce the words ‘Heil’ and ‘Hitler’ together. The majority of them were arrested and about a quarter of them were killed.³⁸

“In the background of the debate,” assessed a 1935 Gestapo report, “stands the general problem of the relation between church and state, of political and religious worldviews.”³⁹

There were many, though by no means a majority, among the Confessing Church and its allies who fiercely dissented from the claims of Nazism and actively expressed their dissent. Perhaps the two most famous people who did this were Martin Niemoller and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer lamented the church’s complacency: “She (the Church) was silent when she should have cried out because the blood of the innocent was crying aloud to heaven.”⁴⁰ Originally a pacifist, Bonhoeffer was eventually compelled to participate in the 1944 Stauffenberg plot to kill Hitler. Alan Bullock places Niemoller among the givers of sermons which were “Among the most courageous demonstrations of opposition during the war.”⁴¹ Along with Niemoller and Bonhoeffer were men such as Bernhard Lichtenberg, a Catholic priest who was arrested because of a prayer he offered for the persecuted Jews,⁴² and Helmuth James von Moltke, who was connected along with Bonhoeffer in the plot to kill Hitler. Von

Moltke declared of his conviction in the Peoples’ Court that “it is for [practice of the Christian ethic] alone that we stand condemned.”⁴³

It would be unjust, however, to judge that it was only those who took the most extreme positions were respectable. “Historians [in attacking passive Christians] have perhaps not been sensitive enough to [the] pervasive sense of fear.”⁴⁴ It is one thing to look back on these events and decide what would have been the best thing to do, and quite another thing to have lived through it and made moral decisions with the very real possibility of resulting in imprisonment or death. “When one is in real danger one simply cannot afford to act on rumors or hearsay.”⁴⁵ Ian Kershaw argues that a broad definition of resistance combined with a social history approach “demythologizes resistance to a large extent, taking it out of the realms of unreachable heroics down to the level of ordinary people”⁴⁶ – and that is my intention.

In August of 1937, Heinrich Himmler, head of the SS, issued a decree that made “the giving and taking of Confessing theological exams illegal and declared the seminaries... illegal as well.”⁴⁷ This made the theological training offered by the Confessing Church a criminal offense – punishable by deportation to a concentration camp. In 1941, the Nazis finally closed the *Kirchliche Hochschule* (the Confessing Church Seminary) and held a series of trials for faculty and students implicated in its activities. Confessing Church lawyers defended them on the basis of their “national qualities” rather than attacking the legitimacy of Nazi legality, making many of those being defended upset at the deliberate misrepresentation. Heinrich Vogel, tried for crimes against the state, said, “Basically, I’m... a fearful man, rather than someone who thirsted for heroic achievements. But I

³⁷ Chandler, 30.

³⁸ Von Oppen, 17.

³⁹ Barnett, 68.

⁴⁰ Chandler, 49.

⁴¹ Bullock, 832-3.

⁴² Von Oppen, 42.

⁴³ Ibid., 63.

⁴⁴ Chandler, 26.

⁴⁵ Von Oppen, 32.

⁴⁶ Ian Kershaw, The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation, 204.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 87.

know situations where I didn't have any other choice."⁴⁸

The Reich government and police purged Christian leaders who did not conform. Lay members were sent to concentration camps. Youth groups were arrested because they infringed on the Hitler Youth's monopoly of permissible teenage activities. A church denouncement of Hitler published abroad, "The Hitler Memo," was retributed by arrests and a murder. The Gestapo attempted to have a woman deported for ringing church bells for the imprisoned Niemöller. She was later arrested for performing a courier mission for the Confessing Church "and was banished 'forever'." In Nazi Germany, [she] recalled ironically, 'everything was forever'.⁴⁹ Confessing Church leaders compiled the *Fürbittenliste*, "a list of church members and pastors throughout Germany who had been interrogated, arrested, or otherwise harassed by the Gestapo."⁵⁰ It grew with time and was read as a prayer list during Confessing Church services.

Doris Bergen is critical of the Confessing Church for its lack of political mobilization despite the unyielding threat of the Nazi state. "What is the value of religion," she asks, "and in particular of Christianity, if it provides no defense against brutality and can even become a willing participant in genocide?"⁵¹ In part, Bergen has failed to respect the internal claim of a religious tradition concerned ultimately with the eternal fate of human beings. However, wherever Protestants stepped into the role of "willing participant" they violated both Bergen's moral expectation and their own. It would be inaccurate, however, to group Confessing Protestants into this group of "willing participants" as this is a description of the outright compliance of the German Christians. For the Confessing Church, however, spiritual reality was inextricably

bound to this life and this world. "Jesus Christ," reads the Barmen Declaration, "as witnessed by the Scripture, is the one Word of God which we hear and obey and in which we trust in life and death."⁵² It has already been noted that few individuals fully embraced this imposition of spiritual reality upon the temporal plane, yet it is clear that the Confessing Church at least aimed at such a goal.

A difference in the spiritual center of gravity, so to speak, illustrates the theological reasoning underlying the political involvement of either side. On the one hand, German Christians, whose center of gravity was here on earth, were fully entrenched within the Reich – loyal to the Führer, submitted to the Reich Bishop. Conversely, the Confessing Church, whose founding document placed their allegiance in the supernatural world, was deeply apolitical. "The *Fürbittenliste* rarely included the name of someone whose activities posed political problems for the church. This became most evident after the July 1944 attempt on Hitler's life; then the names of those implicated who had Confessing Church connections (most notably, Dietrich Bonhoeffer) remained absent from the lists."⁵³

Both the "earthly" politicism of the German Christians and the "heavenly" apoliticism of the Confessing Church can be explained with Peter Berger's theory of legitimation. The German Christians embrace of Nazism at the expense of theological consistency and doctrinal purity makes them the more obvious example as a sociological force blatantly altered the nation of their religion. The explanation for the Confessing Church's behavior is only less obvious if considered without the lens of legitimation, for their attempt at a strict separation of the political and religious spheres was nothing more than an attempt to remain submitted to earthly governments in keeping with the Apostle Paul, legitimizing a grossly illegitimate government without changing

⁴⁸ Barnett, 94.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 77-86.

⁵⁰ Barnett, 63.

⁵¹ Bergen, xi.

⁵² Barth, 10.

⁵³ Barnett, 90.

their doctrine. Whenever they became political, however, as Bonhoeffer and Niemoller did, blunt moral rage took precedence over the forces of sociology and abstract theology and it is thus these men who are celebrated as heroes of resistance.

Thus, it is understandable that the Confessing Church “rallied less against National Socialism than against the German Christian denomination of institutional Protestantism.”⁵⁴ The Barmen Declaration was completely ecclesiological and did not specifically condemn Nazi injustices and barbarism. Hans Thimme, a Confessing member, did not specifically lament this, but instead the passivity on the part of the church. He said that “the omission of the Confessing Church is not what wasn’t said in Barmen. Rather, the omission lies in the fact that this fundamental declaration from Barmen didn’t find any continuity in practical consequences.”⁵⁵ Others were to regret this passivity as well. “[A]fter much time and painful experience under Nazism... some Christians like Martin Niemoller and Kurt Schauf believe that the church should have taken a more prophetic – and openly political – role in opposing Nazism.”⁵⁶

So, then, why did some Protestants embrace Nazism, while others rejected it? What prompted the members of the German Christian Movement to take on a host of impossible ideological contradictions? One could argue that conscience and common sense figured prominently into Confessing Church motivations, into decisions that recognized the fundamental incongruity of Christianity and Nazism. But the same argument could hardly be considered for the German Christians.

Perhaps, then, an answer to Bergen’s question is that there is no humanistic value in a religion that becomes a “willing participant” in genocide. She is partially justified by Conway, who writes that “it has to be admitted that, despite the deep detestation

within the churches’ ranks for the ideological perversions of Nazism, this sentiment was never effective enough to deter Hitler or his associates from carrying out their major objectives.”⁵⁷ It seems, though, that had the organized Protestant resistance of the mid-1940s been allowed to pursue its course that positive political ramifications may have ensued for the nation of Germany. It was not that the Protestant religion became a participant, but that a perverted version of it did – a version that rewrote some of the religion’s fundamental claims. Is it reasonable to conclude that Christianity is useless because of the German Christians? It is reasonable that one might look at the Confessing Church’s apolitical stance and be appalled. However, to group them with the German Christians is to circumvent the fundamental values of both.

It is thus evident that Protestant responses to Nazism were neither black nor white, neither fully rejecting nor fully accommodating, neither pro-Nazi nor anti-Nazi. This corresponds to the weakness of the term “Protestant” itself. Statistics show that sixty-two percent of Germans in 1933 were Protestant, but the only possible certain conclusion is that that percentage of Germans showed fairly consistent attendance in Protestant congregations. It does not, however, speak to the depth of commitment of any one person or any number of people – it does not suggest how fully Protestantism’s construction of morality and society had permeated the lives of that sixty-two percent. It seems evident that other *weltanschauung*-shaping forces were also prevalent in early twentieth-century Germany: the values of *Volk*, German strength, and anti-Semitism, to be sure; but also fear, hunger, and the will to live. In other words, the extent of ideologically-based resistance to the ideologically-based Nazi state was permeated and complicated by all of the fears, struggles and bonds that are common to all people.

⁵⁴ Bergen, 12.

⁵⁵ Barnett, 55.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 72-73.

⁵⁷ Chandler, 30.

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